

## **Opening Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)**

### **“INTEROPERABLE COMMUNICATIONS: ASSESSING PROGRESS SINCE 9/11”**

#### **SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE, AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

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I would like to thank Chairwoman Brooks for holding today’s hearing on interoperable communications. Representing New Jersey’s 10<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, I have constituents who were among first to respond to the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11th. On that terrible day, first responders from multiple jurisdictions - across disciplines - heroically put themselves in harm’s way to save others.

Responding to a disaster of this scale was hard enough. The absence of reliable, effective communications during the response further complicated matters. In the years since 9/11, the Federal government – along with State and local governments – has made significant investments toward achieving interoperability.

During the Hurricane Sandy response, we saw improvement in cross-discipline communication.

Police officers were able to communicate with firefighters across New York and with officials in New Jersey closing airports. However, cross-jurisdiction communications challenges were evident.

Specifically, emergency officials that came to provide mutual aid could not communicate with local first responders on their own radios.

After the storm, the Department of Homeland Security, in coordination with the National Council of Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (NCSWIC), convened a panel to identify lessons learned.

Among the recommendations generated were: increased cross-border exercises and aligning Statewide Interoperability Coordinators with the Communications Emergency Support Function leads.

Although challenges remained, I was pleased to shine a positive light on the progress made, when in June, at my invitation, the Subcommittee convened a hearing to look at Super Bowl XLVIII (48), which was held just outside Newark, New Jersey.

At that hearing, the Committee learned about the significant progress that has been made in addressing the lessons learned from Hurricane Sandy. Indeed, interoperable communications was one area that many Federal officials and local first responders highlighted.

I want to thank the Office of Emergency Communications for its assistance in helping first responders in New Jersey, and their partners in New York, plan for, coordinate, and execute effective interoperability plans for that event. That said, the progress made is in jeopardy.

In recent years, States could rely on the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program to support their Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWIC) and other communications governance structures. But that program has been eliminated.

And other sources for Federal support are scarce particularly since the State Homeland Security Grant Program and the Urban Area Security Initiative are not funded at the levels they once were.

When I joined this panel last year, I was surprised to learn that my home state of New Jersey did not have a SWIC. Now, I understand that a SWIC has been named, but it is one of many hats worn by this official.

The challenge of funding SWIC is not unique to New Jersey.

Other States are facing the same funding challenge and, as a result, there is a very real risk that important governance structures that have taken over a decade to build will be abandoned.

That is why, today, I am introducing the *Statewide Interoperable Communications Enhancement Act*, or the *SWIC Enhancement Act*.

This legislation will ensure that States maintain the progress we have made toward achieving interoperability by preserving the governance structures necessary to make the communications technology work.

These structures are key to achieving interoperability using existing technology and networks and to realizing the full potential of the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network.

Before I close, I want to make clear: interoperability challenges are not unique to State and local governments. Federal agencies share the same struggles.

In November 2012, the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General reported that DHS lacked a cross-component interoperable communications capability.

I introduced H.R. 4289, the *DHS Interoperable Communications Act* – with Chairwoman Brooks - to require the Department to put into place the policies and governance structure necessary achieve interoperability between the Department's components.

H.R. 4289, was passed unanimously by the House earlier this year and I am hopeful that the Senate will consider the bill before this Congress closes.